



## *About the History of Idaho's Capitol*

### **John E. Tourtellotte: A Western Visionary**

*J.E. Tourtellotte, a Boise-based architect, views the town from the peristyle surrounding the Capitol dome. Tourtellotte and his partner, Charles Hummel, were responsible for the design of the Capitol.*

In 1913, the principal architect of Idaho's Capitol, John E. Tourtellotte articulated the formal and philosophical principles he intended his design of the Idaho State Capitol to convey. In his essay, *Capitol of Idaho*, (p. 38) the architect acknowledged man's natural tendency to build architectural environments that express the values of the culture and, consequently, reflect "the ideals and status of man's development".<sup>1</sup> Tourtellotte began his discussion with mention of ancient Egyptian, Roman, and Greek buildings as the precursor to contemporary American civic architecture. He indicated his view that the dark interiors of the ancient Egyptian, Roman and Grecian temples evoked the religious, mysterious, and enigmatic, while America's illuminated civic monuments, particularly Idaho's Capitol, paid tribute to the rationalized institutions of government and civilization. For Tourtellotte, harnessing natural light for illumination and play within the interior spaces was an essential element of the building and expressed notions of purity and clarity of vision. While finishes throughout amplified natural and artificial illumination, particularly in the centerpiece rotunda. Tourtellotte believed "the great white light of conscience must be allowed to shine and by its interior illumination make clear the path of duty." <sup>2</sup>The building was to embody the qualities of the upstanding Idaho citizen, symbolize the spirit of Idaho's commonwealth and express a conviction to:

[A]ct and go forward with courage, to perfect the outward form by the developing and conserving of [Idaho's] resources; encouraging legitimate enterprise and industry, and by embracing and perfecting all that tends to the upbuilding of the moral, intellectual, and physical needs of her people.<sup>3</sup>

Tourtellotte accepted the challenge of creating a suitable and effective environment seriously and very consciously created a building in which state employees and elected officials could work in comfort, thereby offering their best to the state. Tourtellotte boasted of the amenities:

[A]ll the forces of nature are harnessed and made to serve and contribute to the welfare of man in this building. Thus relieved of the discomforts of extremes of temperature, drudgery of upkeep and with gloom and unsanitary conditions overcome, being situated among pleasant optimistic environments, man will be more efficient, resulting in better service by officials and employees and broader and wiser laws being enacted by her legislative bodies in the interest of the common good.<sup>4</sup>

He considered the central rotunda to exemplify the expression of moral strength to which his building occupants would be privileged. Tourtellotte felt the symbolism of the dome should convey “grand and majestic effects. . . patterned after the canopy of Heaven.”<sup>5</sup> Looking to seminal examples of domed buildings in Europe and the United States, Tourtellotte praised St. Peter’s Cathedral at Rome, St. Paul’s Cathedral at London and the National Capitol at Washington as examples of this type of “heavenly” structure.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Tourtelotte & Hummel Architects, The Souvenir Booklet: Capitol of Idaho at Boise, (Boise: Overland Publishing Company, 1913)2.*

<sup>2,3,4</sup> *Tourtelotte & Hummel Architects, The Souvenir Booklet: Capitol of Idaho at Boise, (Boise: Overland Publishing Company, 1913)3.*

<sup>5,6</sup> *Tourtelotte & Hummel Architects, The Souvenir Booklet: Capitol of Idaho at Boise, (Boise: Overland Publishing Company, 1913)1.*